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- NEWS AND ANALYSIS -

36,000 Young Christians Gather In St. Louis To Find 'Purpose & Identity ... In God's Word'

Getty Images.

By **Anthony Cash**

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North American youth face a growing identity crisis: over 300,000

American teenagers identify as the opposite sex, while drug overdoses and suicide are the leading causes of death for younger Americans – claiming over 72,000 young lives in 2020 alone – as loneliness spreads among Gen Z.

These social contagions are fueled by declining numbers in church attendance nationwide, especially among young people. Surveys by Gallup and Pew Research show that increasing majorities of Millennials and Gen Zers do not belong to a church or attend services at all, and a sizable minority are now “religiously unaffiliated” – leading one writer to question if Gen Z should be called “Generation Atheist.”

Yet, in the midst of these problems, many youth have found purpose and identity in something greater – 36,000 teens and young adults from across the continent gathered last week for North American Youth Congress (NAYC), a biennial event that seeks to inspire young people to find purpose in faith and community service. NAYC is organized by the United Pentecostal Church International (UPCI).

“The teenagers and young adults who attend NAYC give us hope for the future,” said UPCI Youth Ministries President Michael Thomas. He said NAYC is “a beacon of light and hope in a world that is being overrun by problems and strife.”

The event took place last Wednesday through Friday in St. Louis, consisting of worship services, practical training sessions, and a community service project, in which attendees packed thousands of disaster relief buckets in partnership with Reach Out America.

Thomas described the event as a “counterculture” in that “we try not to allow societal trends to mold or shape our thinking and beliefs” and directly addressed transgenderism at the event Wednesday night, stating that “Biblical holiness” protects against “gender confusion.”

“How you were born is how you were intended by your Creator to be.” Thomas passionately proclaimed. “God did not put a question mark after your DNA – God put an exclamation point after your DNA! The Word of God says you were fearfully and wonderfully made. Don’t let the world erase how God made you!”

UPCI Superintendent Dr. David K. Bernard contrasted the event’s attendees with broader American culture, which he described as “increasingly secular and even hostile to Christian values.”

Despite the overall decline of religiosity in American youth, Thomas said his organization is experiencing rapid growth, especially among teenagers and young adults.

Meanwhile, author and NYU professor Johnathan Haidt points to “extraordinarily high rates of anxiety, depression, self-harm, suicide and fragility” among Gen Zers as a “national crisis.” Haidt linked the rise of “isolating” activities like social media use to increased rates of depression, particularly among teen girls.

A 2016 study by the National Institute of Medicine, however, suggests that membership in a religious group can decrease one’s risk of depression and other mental health problems. NAYC’s organizers and

depression and other mental health problems. NAYC organizers and attendees echoed the study, saying the conference helps youth connect with others and find their purpose in faith.

When asked about the mental health crisis, Thomas said that for these young Christians, “purpose and identity can be found in the Word of God.”

“This purpose and identity are given to us by a loving Creator,” Thomas told The Daily Wire. “In a world of increasing loneliness and isolation, this event solidifies to a young person that they are not alone in their journey or their walk with God.”

“NAYC helps me find community ... in the power of coming in unity with people from all over the United States and worshiping the same God,” said 15-year-old Kayleigh Stephens. Anita Sullivan Lewis, of Cross Plains, Tennessee, told The Daily Wire that NAYC “gives my nonverbal son who has Down Syndrome and autism a sense of belonging. All the kids in our youth group include him, pray with him, make room for his wheelchair, and give him high fives to let him know he’s loved.”

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Back home, many of these students and parents face intense cultural battles in their school districts. Recent protests have broken out over new mandates in favor of teaching transgenderism and sexually explicit material to kids, uniting Christian and Muslim parents alike. Meanwhile, other religious groups openly embrace Left-wing ideologies.

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It is through our relationship with God and His Word that certain questions about our identity can be settled, our direction and purpose in life can be answered, and we can live the whole and complete life we were intended to live," Thomas concluded.

As cultural battles intensify across the country, many people of faith are conflicted about how to proceed. Yet, the organizers of NAYC see a path forward.

Dr. Bernard said that Christians can be both "loving and firm" in these battles. "We should seek to uphold important values for life, marriage, family, and society; and we should partner with others who share these goals," he said.

"We should respect everyone as created in God's image and as souls for whom Christ died," he continued. "We shouldn't be antagonistic, harsh, hateful, or bigoted, even when provoked. At the same time, we [should] be firmly committed to truth, and doing so isn't bigotry."

Thomas echoed Bernard's call for a firm stand for Biblical values while loving those with whom they disagree. He said that "Jesus showed us the perfect model for this in the New Testament."

"Jesus told us to love everyone, but this does not mean we condone or endorse their lifestyle if it is contrary to His Word. Every word and action that we as Christians display should be motivated by and saturated with love," Thomas said. "Disagreement should never become hatred."

This form of love resounds with young Stephens, and she said her

mission as she returns from the conference is “to impact my community and school by showing the love and compassion of Christ, to see people filled with His Spirit, [and] their families renewed and restored. ... I want lives to be changed and miracles to be performed.”

Amid the cultural battles in public schools across the country, attendees told The Daily Wire how NAYC inspires them to be strong in their faith despite facing opposition in their schools.

“I have been inspired in many ways,” said Talyha Bonny, 14, of Worcester, Massachusetts, who teaches Bible studies at her school over fierce ridicule by her classmates. “NAYC inspired me to put God first because when I do that, I will be strengthened, and I won’t be afraid.”

Stephens, from Troy, Missouri, described being a Christian in her public school as “a hard thing to do in the world we live in.” She said, “NAYC empowers me to tell my school about Jesus and the good he has done for me. It is hard to speak out and tell people about Jesus and the ‘why’ behind my acts,” she said, “but it is beyond rewarding seeing my friends go to church with me and ask me questions about my faith.”

NAYC was last held in 2019 with a pre-pandemic record of 37,000 attendees and took place virtually in 2021 due to the virus. The event will be held next in 2025 at Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis.

The views expressed in this piece are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of The Daily Wire.